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NEWS MEDIA CONTACT:
Stu Nagurka, 202/586-4940

Energy Secretary Richardson Blocks Nickel Recycling at Oak Ridge

Secretary Supports NRC Establishment of National Standards

Energy Secretary Bill Richardson announced today that he is blocking the release into commerce of volumetrically contaminated nickel from Department of Energy (DOE) facilities in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. The action will allow time for the evaluation of alternatives by DOE and for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to make a decision on national treatment standards. The Secretary also is directing expansion of the decision into a new, department-wide policy that would prevent the release of all volumetrically contaminated metals pending the NRC's decision and DOE's determination whether to release any such metals.

"The department will modify its contract with British Nuclear Fuels Inc. (BNFL) to prohibit release of the Oak Ridge nickel into the marketplace," said Secretary Richardson. "We are also establishing a new policy prohibiting the release of all volumetrically contaminated metals at other DOE facilities. This will give the Nuclear Regulatory Commission time to develop national standards for volumetrically contaminated materials, and allow the public an opportunity to weigh in on the development of a national policy. It also will allow DOE to examine alternatives to free release."

Volumetrically contaminated means contamination is present throughout the mass of the metal. While this decision covers some 6,000 tons of contaminated nickel at Oak Ridge, the new national policy will impact approximately 10,000 tons of additional volumetrically contaminated metal at DOE sites.

BNFL, a DOE contractor, is in the process of cleaning up several buildings at the former Oak Ridge uranium enrichment plant, and is removing equipment containing large amounts of nickel. Under the original contract, BNFL had the option of melting and decontaminating the nickel before releasing the material under a State of Tennessee license.

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